

DOINGWHATWORKS



Presentation

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Monitoring the Reading Progress of English Learners

April 2007

Topic: Teaching Literacy in English to K-5 English Learners

Practice: Screen and Monitor Progress

Highlights

- Definition of key reading skills in kindergarten and first grade—phonemic awareness, letter knowledge and reading words
- Characteristics of assessments of these reading skills
- How the focus and benchmarks for assessments change over the course of the year as more challenging information is learned
- Oral reading fluency is particularly important towards the end of first grade, especially for English language learners
- Key characteristics of fluency assessments and tips for monitoring progress of fluency
- How often progress is monitored and the type of assessments used will depend on the students—one size does not fit all

Full Transcript

Slide #1

Welcome to the overview Monitoring the Reading Progress of English Learners.

Slide #2

Last year, River Elementary realized that many of its students were struggling with reading. Some were having trouble reading fluently. Others often failed to complete independent work, or showed signs of frustration when trying to keep up with the class. Realizing it faced a serious problem, the School Leadership Team met to discuss the matter. They concluded that many of the struggling students, most of whom were English learners, had missed out on beginning reading skills and now were having trouble making progress.

River Elementary realized it needed a tool to help them spot reading problems early on, so that teachers could address them. That's why the school decided to add a system of formative assessments to its core reading program.

Formative assessments allow teachers to identify who in the class is having difficulties, and *what* those difficulties are. They also allow teachers to focus on *individual* needs, which helps teachers reinforce important skills *before* they become big problems.

For example, first-grade teacher Mrs. Lee found that two different groups of students in *her* class needed help in two different areas. One group was still learning to recognize the separate sounds in words, another group how to make the connection between the names of letters and their corresponding sounds. With this data, Mrs. Lee was able to re-teach a small group of students how to segment the sounds in words, and give extra practice in *letter naming* to the other group. She then paired up students who had mastered a skill with those who needed more practice. Through formative assessments, Mrs. Lee addressed the problems of individual students, enabling her to go forward with the core reading program knowing *all* her students were on track.

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Mastery of reading skills is critical to the success of all students, and it's often the area where English learners need additional support.

Without it, they may not develop foundational skills at an early age—leading to a number of problems that can stay with them the rest of their school careers.

That's why it's important to diagnose difficulties for English learners early on.

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There are three key skills English learners should master during kindergarten and first grade. They are:

- 1) Phonemic awareness
- 2) Letter knowledge and the alphabetic principle
- 3) Word reading and basic decoding

Measurements of student progress in these three areas are valid for determining whether or not English learners need extra support in beginning reading.

Let's look at how formative assessment can help you determine how well kindergarteners and first graders are mastering these skills.

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Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear and manipulate individual sounds. Teachers often say it's a skill that can be done in the dark because it requires the ability to *hear* individual sounds without needing to *see* any print. Sharpening awareness of sounds is a foundation skill both native speakers of English and English learners need when learning to read.

Teachers can use formative assessments to monitor phonemic awareness by asking students to perform tasks such as:

- blending sounds to form words
- repeating non-words accurately
- segmenting words into parts
- matching like sounds, or
- distinguishing unlike sounds.

These types of tasks can help a teacher assess how well each student is able to recognize and distinguish key sounds in English.

An English learner, for example, might have difficulty distinguishing particular sounds—the difference between /sh/ and /ch/, for example—since these sounds are not part of their native language. Or, the assessment might identify students who cannot hear and manipulate sounds very well.

Once teachers identify such problems, they can then work on them. Practice games that challenge children to sound out different sounds might work for most students. Those struggling with specific sounds could get additional attention and practice with those issues—allowing them to quickly catch up to the rest of the class.

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Letter knowledge and the alphabetic principle is the next key skill early readers should master. Learning the relationships between sounds and letters helps children decipher words—a critical reading skill. Formative assessments of this skill typically ask students to name upper case and lower case letters. Another asks students to produce or recognize letter sounds and letter combination sounds. Because so many letters share similar sounds, developing the ability to recognize relationships between sounds and letters can be challenging for young students—especially English learners.

English learners often need extra support in applying the *alphabetic principle*—the idea that letters represent sounds—because they may have already made an association between letters and sounds in their native language—associations that often differ from the rules of English. Teachers will need to re-teach these associations in English before English learners will be able to fully comprehend written text.

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Once students have mastered initial skills associated with sounds and letters, they are ready to learn basic decoding and reading words. Because the English language does not have one-to-one correspondence between letters and sounds, most beginning readers need explicit instruction and a lot of practice recognizing and producing the patterns of *sound-letter correspondence*. The fact that a sound in English can often be made by more than one letter or letter combination can be confusing to all students—especially English learners.

Take the “eff” sound, for example. Both the letter f as in “fall” and the letters gh as in “laugh” can be used to make the “eff” sound. Teachers can begin with common single letter-sound combinations and progress to more complex combinations such as /ch/ or /aw/.

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We have seen how assessing phonemic awareness, letter knowledge, the alphabetic principle, and basic decoding are key to helping early readers. But, as students build skills, formative assessments need to change to monitor new skill development.

So, while assessments near the middle of first grade might ask students to read nonsense words that represent different patterns of letter/sound combinations, assessments later that year might focus on words that represent more challenging combinations of sounds, or require students to distinguish inflectional endings.

The key idea is to focus assessments on the skills the student is learning or needs to learn at

that moment—no matter what level class the student is in—to be sure that each student has the fundamental skills they need to succeed.

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That is why teachers should also assess the *oral fluency* of their students toward the end of first grade to monitor how accurately and smoothly students can read connected text.

Fluency is the ability to read text quickly, accurately, and with proper expression. Teachers cannot measure fluency until children are reading text—usually towards the end of first grade.

Fluency practice is particularly important for English learners because it provides opportunities to apply their decoding skills, vocabulary, and background knowledge in context. As these skills become automatic, children will begin to read text fluently and can focus on understanding what they're reading.

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Formative assessments of fluency typically ask students to read short passages aloud. The assessor notes accuracy and speed, and in some cases, also checks the student's comprehension of the passage.

Since most students need lots of oral reading practice to gain fluency, teachers see this as a perfect opportunity for practicing with peers.

Fluency assessments might reveal the need for more instruction in key skills students are missing such as automatic recognition of sight words or particular decoding patterns.

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Teachers can use the following three tips to help ensure their monitoring efforts go smoothly:

Begin with a core reading program. Formative reading assessments and a core reading program work hand-in-hand. Because the core program guides instruction, formative assessments should be aligned with the sequence of specific intended learning outcomes in the core series.

Assess on a schedule based on student needs. Formative assessments should be used at least **THREE TIMES A YEAR** with all students, and more often than that with English learners at risk for learning problems—at least once a month or more.

Teachers should consider that students' understanding of a task can be enhanced by explanation of the directions in the child's native language or by modeling proper response.

even when their proficiency in English is limited. Doing so, however, requires that teachers know how to determine whether or not students understand the task they are asked to perform.

Provide professional development that helps school teams interpret the results of formative assessments. Meaningful interpretation of results requires an understanding of the process English learners go through in learning to read.

Schools that lack such knowledge can fall into assessment mistakes. To cite one example, measures administered at the beginning of kindergarten tend to over-identify students at risk. These scores give a general sense of students' early reading skills, but they are NOT an indication of how well students will respond to instruction, nor are they an indication of reading disabilities.

The final point to consider before beginning a formative assessment program is that one size DOES NOT fit all. Different programs work best with different classes. It all depends on the skill level of the students in that particular class.

Some teachers may need to monitor phonemic awareness throughout the beginning of first grade, other teachers will not.

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However, if formative assessment is used in a targeted way in the context of a scientifically-based core reading program, it can be a powerful tool that not only enables English learners to succeed, but also benefits the *entire* class.

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To learn more about formative reading assessments, including more next steps, see the additional resources on this website.